



## Introduction: Nordic Artists' Colonies 1870–1914 (Part 2)

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# Introduction: Nordic Artists' Colonies 1870– 1914 (Part 2)

While naturalism was the dominant style of most artists' colonies in the 1880s, painters working in the Nordic countries in the 1890s and 1900s abandoned realism in favor of a more subjective and emotional response to the landscape. Those who had spent some time in Paris were aware of the recent "synthetist" experiments of artists such as Emile Bernard and Paul Gauguin, while the latter's *Vision of the Sermon* (1888, National Galleries of Scotland) was hailed in 1891 as the first symbolist painting by the critic Albert Aurier.<sup>1</sup> On their return to Sweden from France in the early 1890s, Richard Bergh (1858–1919), Nils Kreuger (1858–1930), and Karl Nordström (1855–1923) formed an artists' colony at Varberg on the north coast of the country. From 1893 onward they produced a series of

bleak, simplified landscapes, inspired in part by the work of Gauguin and Van Gogh.<sup>2</sup> In time the Varberg colony became, in Michelle Facos's words, a veritable "crucible of Synthetist experimentation."<sup>3</sup> The group was profoundly influenced by the writings of Bergh who, steeped in European symbolism, saw the role of art as the expression of the inexpressible and encouraged his fellow artists to evoke the profundity of human feeling through landscape. As the essay on Karl Nordström in this volume reveals, Bergh associated his companion's stark interpretations of the harsh and remote terrain around Varberg with something distinctly "Swedish." Works such as Nordström's view of the Varberg fortress express an emotional intensity which is symbolic, not only of Swedish identity, but of a more universally Nordic cultural "essence."<sup>4</sup>

A similar intensity and introspection characterize much of the work of the Rackstad colony, a small community of artists that formed around Lake Racken in Värmland, Sweden, at the turn of the century. The group was led by the talented second-generation National Romantic painter Gustaf Fjaestad (1868–1948), who specialized in snow scenes, evoking the primitive remoteness of the wilderness area around Arvika. In 1898, Gustaf and Maja Fjaestad rented the sculptor Christian Eriksson's studio house Oppstuhage at Taserud and later moved to Kampudden by Lake Racken, where they built their own house and studios. They were joined by Björn Ahlgrensson (1872–1918), Fritz Lindström (1874–1962), and Bror Lindh (1877–1941), as well as ceramicists Riborg Böving (1880–1953) and Hilma Persson-Hjelm (1877–1953). The artists were united by a strong National Romantic longing to evoke the remote beauty of the Swedish landscape, but also to celebrate local craftsmanship, and their more collaborative enterprises were inspired by the utopian ideals of the English Arts and Crafts movement.<sup>5</sup>

The Norwegian artists that gathered at Lysaker in the late 1890s shared a similar sense of national identity, expressed through a noticeably decorative impulse. Led by Erik Werenskiöld (1855–1938) and supported by the critic Andreas Aubert (1851–1913), both Gerhard Munthe (1849–1929) and Eilif Peterssen (1852–1928) engaged with a broad range of imagery inspired by local folklore and Norse mythology, while their bold colors and stylized forms derived as much from medieval paintings and tapestries as from contemporary European art. Catherine Corbet-Milward introduces Nils Messel's article on this often overlooked colony of artists, reminding us that the Lysaker circle was equally as important to our understanding of Norwegian national art as their counterparts at the earlier Fleskum colony, featured in Part 1.

It is notable that in several Nordic colonies of this period—and in contrast to such communities in France—women played a major, if not always entirely equal, role as practicing artists. An example is the Danish colony that formed on the island of Funen at the turn of the twentieth century. The core members of the group were two couples—Johannes (1867–1961) and Alhed Larsen (1872–1927), and Fritz (1862–1939)

and Anna (1870–1914) Syberg—as well as Larsen's sister Christine (1876–1960) and Peter Hansen (1868–1928). They developed a loosely impressionist style influenced by Paul Gauguin (whose wife, Mette Gad, was Danish) and the artist Theodor Philipsen (1840–1920); but their work was also characterized by a bold palette, inspired by Kristian Zahrtmann (1843–1917), who taught at the Artists Studio School in Copenhagen from 1885 to 1908. Despite her role as wife and mother, Alhed Larsen exhibited five times at the Charlottenborg Spring exhibition in Copenhagen and in 1912 the Funen women staged their own exhibition. With the passage of time, however, their careers were overshadowed by the male members of the community, largely as a result of the critical reception they received. Anna Syberg, for example, was often dismissed as a mere flower painter, and when Faaborg Museum first opened in 1910 only very few Funish women artists were represented. The text in this volume, introduced by Gry Hedin, discusses the role of the businessman Mads Rasmussen (1856–1916) in founding the museum, initially in his summer apartment at Konservesgården, and later in a more permanent, purpose-built gallery.

A very different community of male and female artists, writers, and musicians formed on the shores of Lake Tuusula in Finland at the end of the 1890s. Those who designed houses and settled there were influenced not only by Arts and Crafts aesthetics, but by the writings of Tolstoy, Carl Larsson, and, above all, the Swedish writer Ellen Key (1849–1926), whose 1904 essay *Beauty for All* is translated here for the first time and introduced by Michelle Facos. Within easy reach of Helsinki, Lake Tuusula offered peace and seclusion, as well as inspiring surroundings. The first to move there was the writer Juhani Aho (1861–1921) and his wife, the artist Venny Soldan-Brofeldt (1863–1945). They rented the villa Vårbacka from Järvenpää Manor, which came to be known as “Aholä” or “Aho's place.” The painter Eero Järnefelt (1863–1937) was encouraged to settle at Suviranta, the house he built there for his family. They were soon joined by the artist Pekka Halonen (1865–1933),<sup>6</sup> who built a studio villa, Haloseniemi, on a rocky peninsula next to the lake, and the poet Juhana Henrik Erkkö (1849–1906), who erected a house (Erkkölä) nearby in Syvälahti. Finally, in 1904 the composer Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) built his home there at Ainola.

This disparate group of creative minds was arguably more of a “community,” residing on the shores of Lake Tuusula on a semi-permanent basis, than a more temporary “colony” of artists. But, like so many of the Nordic colonies featured in this special issue, Tuusula was characterized by a shared sense of nationalism, as well as a committed engagement with the avant-garde. Caught up in the cultural revival that swept across Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, the group strove to promote Finnish identity through their work during a period of distinct political unrest, culminating in the declaration of Finnish independence in 1917. It is fitting, then, that, one hundred years on, an extract from Riitta Konttin-

en's comprehensive examination of Tuusula, introduced by the Finnish art historian Marja Lahelma, forms the final and longest text in this special issue.

## Notes

1. G. Albert Aurier, "Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin," *Mercure de France* 2 (2 March 1891): 155–64.
2. On the work of the Varberg colony, see Michelle Facos, *Nationalism and the Nordic Imagination: Swedish Art of the 1890s* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1998), 137–63. Michael Jacobs dates the first year of the colony as 1892, but Facos points out that it was only after the 1893 exhibition of works by Gauguin and Van Gogh in Copenhagen that the Varberg colony was established. Michael Jacobs, *Good and Simple Life: Artist Colonies in Europe and America* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985), 91; and Facos, *Nationalism*, 137.
3. Facos, *Nationalism*, 137.
4. Gustav Näsström, "Sekelskiftets skymningsromantik," in *Det är vackrast när det skymmer*, exhibition catalog (Stockholm: Prins Eugens Waldemarsudde, 1976), 21–2, cited in Facos, *Nationalism*, 148.
5. Facos, *Nationalism*, 187. Björn and Elsa Ahlgrensson rented a house in Perserud, while Lindström was based for a time in Rackstad.
6. On Pekka Halonen, see Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff (ed.), *Pekka Halonen* (Helsinki: Ateneum Art Museum, 2008).